

*LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE—I*

**SUPPLEMENTARY READER**

*Class IX Course B*



LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE—1

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## Foreword

The Supplementary Reader is an integral item of the language package comprising a textbook and a workbook. The Supplementary Reader is essentially designed to promote in the learner a love for reading by exposing him to good samples of English literature which hold the mirror up to different facets of life. To encourage the learner to read extensively on his/her own, a list of Suggested Readings is given at the end of each story or play.

The NCERT is grateful to the teachers and language experts who examined the manuscript and gave us their valuable comments. We would welcome the suggestions from teachers and students in the light of which we would improve the next edition of this book.

P L. MALHOTRA

*Director*

National Council of Educational  
Research and Training



## Introduction

This Supplementary Reader is meant for student. had at least three years of English. The book designed to promote independent reading in th

### *Highlights of the Book*

1. A conscious attempt has been made
  - (a) to select stories and plays which w  
14/15 year old boy/girl
  - (b) to expose the student to good specim  
English literature
2. There are some stories/plays which have an  
humour and adventure
3. There are some stories, on the other hand, which  
score universal issues like love, fear of death, re
4. To motivate the learner to read, to rouse the learner  
interest, a short, crisp introduction is given in italics.
5. The activities have been divided into three sections:
  - (a) Section A: Comprehension
    - (i) The exercises in this section highlight the impor-  
tant points in the story/play.
    - (ii) Some of the exercises are designed to deepen the  
student's understanding of the piece
    - (iii) The paragraphs of the stories/plays are num-  
bered. The numbers of the exercises correspond  
with the numbers of the paragraphs, i.e. the  
answer to Exercise 4, for example, would be  
found in the para/paragraphs numbered 4
  - (b) Section B: For Discussion/Let's Find out  
The main objective of this section is to generate

discussion among the learners so as to develop in them communicative skills and also to make them aware of the world around them and to make them sensitive to the various aspects of life

(c) Section C: Suggested Reading

This section lists books, stories, or plays on the same theme or by the same writer

The main purpose of the Supplementary Reader is to instil in the learner a love for reading. If after reading a story or a play the student reads the books listed under Section C or goes to the library, the purpose of this book will have been fully served.

S.K. RAM



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# 1. The Bear Story

*Axel Munthe*

*[Have you ever seen a bear being kept as a pet? Let's read this story about a pet bear. Let's find out what he likes to eat, what he likes to do, what mischief he gets into.]*

"Tell us an animal story," said my friend the Countess. "They say your country Sweden is full of bears, tell us something about them, tell us a bear story!"

I narrated this story:

- 1 "There was once a lady who lived in an old manor-house on the border of a big forest, high up in the North. This lady had a pet bear she was very fond of. It had been found in the forest, half-dead of hunger, so small and helpless that it had to be brought up on the bottle by the lady and the old cook. This was several years ago and now it had grown up to a big bear, so big and strong that he could have slain a cow and carried it away between his two paws if he had wanted to.
- 2 But he did not want to, he was a most amiable bear who did not dream of harming anybody, man or beast. He used to sit outside his kennel and look with his small intelligent eyes most amicably at the cattle grazing in the field near by. The three shaggy mountain ponies in the stable knew him well and did not mind in the least when he shuffled into the stable with his mistress. The children used to ride on his back and had more than once been found asleep in his kennel between his two paws. The three Lapland dogs loved to play all sorts of games with him, pull his ears and his stump of a tail and tease him in every way, but he did not mind it in the least.
- 3 He had never tasted meat, he ate the same food as the dogs and often out of the same plate, bread, porridge, potatoes, cabbages, turnips. He had a fine appetite, but his friend the cook saw to it that he got his fill. Bears are vegetarians if they have a chance, fruit is what they like the best. In the autumn he

- used to sit and look with wistful eyes at the ripening apples in the orchard and in his young days he had been sometimes unable to resist the temptation to climb the tree and help himself to a handful of them. Bears look clumsy and slow in their movements, but try a bear with an apple-tree and you will soon find out that he can easily beat any school boy at that game. Now he had learnt that it was against the law, but he kept his small eyes wide open for any apples that fell to the ground. There had also been some difficulties about the beehives; he had been punished for this by being put on the chain for two days with a bleeding nose and he had never done it
- 4 again. Otherwise he was never put on the chain except for the night and quite rightly so, for a bear, like a dog, is apt to get somewhat ill-tempered if kept on the chain, and no wonder. He was also put on the chain on Sundays when his mistress went to spend the afternoon with her married sister who lived in a solitary house on the other side of the mountain-lake, a good hour's walk through the dense forest. It was not supposed to be good for him to wander about in the forest with all its temptations, it was better to be on the safe side. He was also a bad sailor and had once taken such a fright at a sudden gust of wind that he had upset the boat and he and his mistress had to swim to the shore. Now he knew quite well what it meant when his mistress put him on the chain on Sundays, with a friendly tap on his head and the promise of an apple on her return if he had been good during her absence. He was sorry but resigned, like a good dog, when his mistress tells him he cannot come with her for a walk
- 5 One Sunday when the lady had chained him up as usual and was about half-way through the forest, she suddenly thought she heard the cracking of a tree-branch on the winding foot-path behind her. She looked back and was horrified to see the bear coming along full speed. Bears look as if they move along quite slowly but they shuffle along much faster than a trotting horse. In a minute he had joined her, panting and sniffing, to take up his usual place, dog-fashion, at her heels. The lady was very angry, she was already late for lunch, there was no time to take him back home, she did not want him to come with her, and besides, it was very naughty of

him to have disobeyed her. She told him in her severest voice to go back at once, menacing him with her parasol. He stopped a moment and looked at her with his cunning eyes, but did not want to go back and kept on sniffing at her. When the lady saw that he had even lost his new collar, she got still more angry and hit him on the nose with her parasol so hard that it broke in two. He stopped again, shook his head and opened his big mouth several times as if he wanted to say something. Then he turned round and began to shuffle back the way he had come stopping now and then to look at the lady till at last she lost sight of him.

- 6 When the lady came home in the evening, the bear was sitting in his usual place outside his kennel looking very sorry for himself. The lady was still very angry and went up to him and began to scold him most severely and said he would have to be chained for two more days. The old cook who loved the bear as he had been her son rushed out from the kitchen very angry.

'What are you scolding him for, missus,' said the cook, 'he has been as good as gold the whole day, bless him! He has been sitting here quite still on his haunches as meek as an angel, looking the whole time towards the gate for you to come back.' "

### *Activities*

#### *A Comprehension*

1. Where did the lady find the bear cub? How did she bring it up?
2. The bear grew up but "he was a most amiable bear". Give three examples to prove this.
3. What did the bear eat? There were two things he was not allowed to do. What were they?
4. When was the bear tied up with a chain? Why?

5. What happened one Sunday when the lady was going to her sister's house? What did the lady do? What was the bear's reaction?
6. Why was the bear looking sorry for himself in the evening? Why did the cook get angry with her mistress?

### *B. For Discussion*

1. Most people keep dogs and cats as pets. Can you think of some unusual pets that people keep?
2. The second bear did not attack the lady because he was afraid of her.

### *C. Suggested Reading*

1. *Born Free*, Joy Adamson
2. *Living Free*, Joy Adamson
3. *Rosy is My Elephant*, Gerald Durrell

## 2. The Swan and the Princes

*[Who owns a bird or an animal—the one who catches it or the one who looks after it?]*

### CHARACTERS

Suddodhana *the King of Kapilvastu*

Sidhartha *the Prince of Kapilvastu*

Dev Datt: *Sidhartha's cousin*

The Chief Minister and four other Ministers of the King

The Door-keeper

*[King Suddodhana is sitting on his throne. His Ministers are sitting around him. The Chief Minister is saying something to him. Just then the door-keeper enters and bows to the King.]*

DOOR-KEEPER: Long live the King! Sir, Prince Dev Datt wants to come in.

KING: Bring him in.

*[The door-keeper bows and goes out.]*

CHIEF MINISTER: I wonder why Prince Dev Datt wants to see the King at this time.

SECOND MINISTER: Perhaps he wants to complain against someone.

*[The door-keeper enters with Dev Datt. Both of them bow to the King.]*

KING: What is it, Dev Datt? Why have you come to me at this time?

DEV DATT: Sir, the Prince will not give me my swan. I want justice from you.

KING: *[smiling]* Be calm, Dev Datt. Has Sidhartha taken your swan from you?

- 1 DEV DATT: Yes, sir, he has. I shot it and it fell on the ground near the Prince. He picked it up and said he wouldn't give it to me.

KING: That's very naughty of Sidhartha. [*to the door-keeper*]  
Go and call him

[*The door-keeper bows and goes out.*]

THIRD MINISTER: [*softly to the Fourth Minister*] The Prince is a good lad. He can't do a thing that's wrong.

FOURTH MINISTER: I agree with you.

[*The door-keeper enters with Prince Sidhartha, who has a white swan in his arms. Sidhartha bows to the King.*]

KING: Sidhartha, Dev Datt says that you've taken his swan. Is that the swan which you took from him?

SIDHARTHA: Your Highness, Dev Datt has complained about this swan, but it isn't his swan. It's mine

- 2 DEV DATT: No, Your Highness, it is not his. It is mine. I shot it with an arrow. Sidhartha is telling a lie.

KING: Be calm, Dev Datt. You say that the swan is yours because you shot it. Is that right?

DEV DATT: Yes, sir, that's quite right

KING: What do you say, Sidhartha? Why do you say that the swan is yours?

- 3 SIDHARTHA: Your Highness, Dev Datt shot this swan but I saved its life. That's why it's mine.

MINISTERS: Hear! Hear!

KING: Listen, Sidhartha. A kshatriya can't give up what he has shot. Do you agree with me?

- 4 SIDHARTHA: Yes, I do, sir, but a kshatriya can't give up a suppliant either. This swan came to me for protection. I can't give it up.

DEV DATT: Your Highness, this is injustice. I shot the swan, so it's mine.



KING: Well, boys, I'm puzzled. It's a strange case. I don't know how to decide it. [*to the Chief Minister*] Can you help me?

CHIEF MINISTER: I'll try, Your Highness.

KING: Very well, then. Please go ahead.

CHIEF MINISTER: Prince Sidhartha and Prince Dev Datt, please listen to me. Prince Dev Datt says that the swan is his because he shot it, and Prince Sidhartha says that it is his because he saved its life. Am I right?

SIDHARTHA AND DEV DATT: Yes, you're right.

- 5 CHIEF MINISTER: Good. Now, Prince Sidhartha, please put the swan on this stool.

[*Sidhartha puts the swan on the stool and goes back to his place. The swan is frightened and keeps looking at Sidhartha.*]

CHIEF MINISTER: Prince Dev Datt, please come forward and ask the swan to come to you.

- 6 DEV DATT [*coming forward*] Come to me, O swan! Come! Come! Come! [*The swan trembles and cries with fear.*]

CHIEF MINISTER: That will do, Prince Dev Datt. Now it's your turn to call the swan, Prince Sidhartha. [*Dev Datt goes back and Sidhartha comes forward.*]

- 7 SIDHARTHA: [*going near the swan*] Dear swan, don't be afraid. I've come to you. Come and sit in my arms. [*The swan at once flies to Sidhartha's arms.*]

CHIEF MINISTER: [*to the King*] Your Highness, the swan has decided the case.

KING: It has, indeed; and we accept the decision. The swan belongs to Prince Sidhartha.

ALL: Long live Prince Sidhartha!

### *Activities*

#### *A Comprehension*

- 1 Who did Dev Datt shoot down? Why was he angry with Sidhartha?
- 2 Why did Dev Datt say that the swan was his?
- 3 Why did Sidhartha claim that the swan was his?
- 4 The swan came to Sidhartha seeking
  - (a) mercy
  - (b) protection
  - (c) freedom
  - (d) revenge
- 5 What did the Chief Minister ask Sidhartha to do?
- 6 Dev Datt called out to the swan. Did it come to him? What was its reaction?
- 7 What did Sidhartha say to the swan. What did the bird do?

#### *B. Let's Find Out*

1. Find out the names of two bird sanctuaries.
2. Find out a few details about Project Tiger.
3. (i) Often birds and animals are killed by irresponsible, greedy people. Which birds and animals are killed for
  - (a) their skin?
  - (b) ivory?
  - (c) their feathers?
  - (d) their fur?
  - (e) musk?
- (ii) How are these things used?

*C. Suggested Reading*

1. *My Grandfather's Zoo*, Ruskin Bond
2. *Born Free*, Joy Adamson

### 3. Caged

*L.E. Greeve*

*[Freedom is precious and a person appreciates it more if he or she has been denied freedom for a while ]*

Mr Purcell did not believe in ghosts. Nevertheless, the man who bought the two doves, and his strange act immediately thereafter, left him with a distinct sense of the eerie.<sup>1</sup> As though, behind his departed customer, there had lingered a musty smell of death.

Purcell was a small, fussy man, red cheeks and a tight, melon stomach. Large glasses so magnified his eyes as to give him the appearance of a wise and very genial owl. He owned and conducted a pet shop. He sold cats and dogs and monkeys, he dealt in fish food and bird seed, prescribed remedies for ailing canaries, and displayed on his shelves long rows of ornate and gilded cages. He considered himself something of a professional man.

A constant stir of movement pervaded his dusky shop, whispered twitters, sly rustling; squeals, cheeps, and sudden squeaks. Small feet scampered in frantic circles, frightened, bewildered, blindly seeking. Across the shelves pulsed this endless flicker of life. The place smelled of confined flesh. But the customers who came in said:

"Aren't they cute? look at that little cadget, they're sweet."

And Mr Purcell himself would smile and briskly rub his hands and emphatically bob his head.

Each morning, when the routine of opening his shop was completed, it was the proprietor's custom to perch on a high stool, behind the counter, unfold his morning paper, and pompously digest the day's news. As he read he would smirk, frown, reflectively purse his lips, knowingly lift his eyebrows, nod in grave agreements. He read everything, even advice to the lovelorn and the minutely detailed columns of want ads.

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<sup>1</sup> weird, fear-inspiring

It was a raw, blustery day. Wind gusted against the high, plate-glass windows. Smoke filmed the wintry city and the air was gray with a pallor of frost. Having completed his usual tasks, Mr Purcell again mounted the high stool, and unfolded his morning paper. He adjusted his glasses, and glanced with the unbiased air of a righteous judge, at the day's headlines. Skittering feet, chirping and squeaking and mewling, the soft frantic stir of life, vibrated all around him; yet Mr Purcell heard it no more than he would have heard the monotonous ticking of a familiar clock.

There was a bell over the door that jangled whenever a customer entered. This morning, however, for the first time Mr Purcell could recall, it failed to ring. Simply he glanced up, and there was the stranger, standing just inside the door, as if he had materialized out of thin air.

The storekeeper slid off his stool. From the first instant he knew instinctively, unreasonably, that the man hated him; but out of habit he rubbed his hands briskly together, smiled and nodded.

"Good morning," he beamed. "What can I do for you?"

The man's shiny shoes squeaked forward. His suit was cheap, ill-fitting but obviously new. A gray pallor deadened his pinched features. He had a shuttling glance and close-cropped hair. Ignoring Purcell for the moment, he rolled his gaze around the shadowy shop.

"A nasty morning," volunteered the shopkeeper. He clasped both hands across his melon-like stomach, and smiled importantly. "I see by the paper we're in for a cold snap. Now what was it you wanted?"

The man stared closely at Purcell, as though just now aware of his presence. He said, "I want something in a cage."

"Something in a cage?" Mr Purcell was a bit confused, "you mean—some sort of pet?"

"I mean what I said," snapped the man. "Something in a cage. Something that is small."

"I see," hastened the storekeeper, not at all certain that he did. His eyes narrowed gravely and he pursed his lips. "Now let me think. A white rat, perhaps? I have some very nice white rats."

"No," said the man. "Not rats. Something with wings. Something that flies."

"A bird!" exclaimed Mr Purcell.

bird's all right." The customer pointed suddenly to a cage which contained two snowy birds. "Doves? How or those?"

Five-fifty," came the prompt answer. "And a very reasonable price. They are a fine pair."

Five-fifty?" The sallow man was obviously crestfallen. He hastily produced a five dollar bill. "I'd like to have these birds if this is all I got. Just five dollars."

Mentally, Mr Purcell made a quick calculation, which told him that at a fifty cent reduction he could still reap a tidy profit. He smiled magnanimously.<sup>2</sup>

"My dear man, if you want them that badly, you can certainly have them for five dollars."

"I'll take them." He laid his five dollars on the counter. Mr Purcell tottered on tiptoe, unhooked the cage, and handed it to his customer. The man cocked his head to one side, listening to the constant chattering, the rushing scurry of the shop. "That noise," he blurted. "Doesn't it get you?"

"Noise? What noise?" Mr Purcell looked surprised. He could hear nothing unusual.

The customer glared. "I mean all this caged stuff. Drives you crazy, doesn't it?"

Mr Purcell drew back. Either the man was insane, or drunk and hastily, "Yes, yes. Certainly, I guess so."

"Listen." The staring eyes came closer. "How long d'you think it takes me to make the five dollars?"

The merchant wanted to order him out of the shop. But, oddly enough, he couldn't. He heard himself dutifully asking, "Why—how long did it take you?"

The other laughed. "Ten years: at hard labor. Ten years to five dollars. Fifty cents a year."

That was best, Purcell decided, to humor him. "My, my! ten years. That's certainly a long time. Now..."

"They give you five dollars," laughed the man, "and a cheap price. Tell you not to get caught again."

Mr Purcell mopped his sweating brow. "Now, about the care and feeding of your doves. I would advise..."

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<sup>2</sup> showing generosity

"Bah!" The sallow man swung around, and stalked abruptly from the store. Purcell sighed with sudden relief. He waddled to the window and stared out. Just outside, his peculiar customer had halted. He was holding the cage shoulder-high, staring at his purchase. Then, opening the cage, he reached inside and drew out one of the doves. He tossed it into the air. He drew out the second and tossed it after the first. They rose like wind-blown balls of fluff and were lost in the smoky gray of the wintry city. For an instant the liberator's silent and lifted gaze watched after them. Then he dropped the cage. A futile, suddenly forlorn figure, he shoved both hands deep in his trouser pockets, hunched down his head and shuffled away. The merchant's brow was puckered with perplexity. So desperately had the man desired the doves that he had let him have them at a reduced price. And immediately he had turned them loose. "Now why," Mr Purcell muttered, "did he do that?" He felt vaguely insulted.

### *Activities*

#### *A Comprehension*

1. Do you think Mr Purcell was a very busy man? Give a reason in support of your answer
2. (a) Describe the stranger who entered the shop.  
(b) What did he want?
3. (a) The man insisted on buying the doves because he was very fond of birds. Do you agree? Give a reason for your answer  
(b) How did he earn the five dollars?
4. Was the man interested in the care and feeding of the doves he bought? Why?
5. (a) What did the man do with the doves? Why did he do so?  
(b) Why did the shopkeeper "feel vaguely insulted"?

*B. For Discussion*

1. The title "Caged" is appropriate for the story
2. Freedom is man's most precious possession.

*C. Suggested Reading*

The Bishop's Candlesticks





## 4. *Pret* in the House

*Ruskin Bond*

*[Have you ever heard of a ghost who is naughty, who is always playing pranks on somebody? Would you like to live with such a ghost or would you like to get rid of him?]*

- 1 It was Grandmother who decided that we must move to another house. And it was all because of a *pret*, a mischievous ghost, who had been making life intolerable for everyone.
- 2 In India, *pret*s usually live in peepal trees, and that's where our *pret* first had his abode—in the branches of an old peepal which had grown through the compound wall and had spread into the garden on our side, and over the road on the other side.

For many years the *pret* had lived there quite happily, without bothering anyone in the house. I suppose the traffic on the road had kept him fully occupied. Sometimes, when a tonga was passing, he would frighten the pony, and as a result the little pony-cart would go careening off in the wrong direction. Occasionally he would get into the engine of a car or bus, which would soon afterwards have a breakdown. And he liked to knock the sola-tops off the heads of sahibs, who would curse and wonder how a breeze had sprung up so suddenly, only to die down again just as quickly. Although the *pret* could make himself felt, and sometimes heard, he was invisible to the human eye.

- 3 At night people avoided walking beneath the peepal tree. It was said that if you yawned beneath the tree, the *pret* would jump down your throat and ruin your digestion. Grandmother's tailor, Jaspal, who never had anything ready on time, blamed the *pret* for all his troubles. Once, when yawning, Jaspal had forgotten to snap his fingers in front of his mouth—always mandatory when yawning beneath peepal trees—and the *pret* had got in without any difficulty. Since then, Jaspal had always been suffering from tummy upsets.

But it had left our family alone until, one day, the peepal tree had been cut down.

It was nobody's fault except, of course, that Grandfather had given the PWD permission to cut the tree, which had been on our land. They wanted to widen the road, and the tree and a bit of wall were in the way; so both had to go. But hardly a day had passed when we discovered that the *pret*, deprived of his tree, had decided to take up residence in the bungalow. And since a good *pret* must be bad in order to justify his existence, he was soon up to all sorts of mischief in the house.

- 4 He began by hiding Grandmother's spectacles whenever she took them off.

"I'm sure I put them down on the dressing-table," she grumbled.

A little later they were found balanced precariously on the snout of a wild boar, whose stuffed and mounted head adorned the verandah wall. Being the only boy in the house, I was at first blamed for this prank, but a day or two later when the spectacles disappeared again only to be discovered dangling from the wires of the parrot's cage, it was agreed that some other agency was at work.

Grandfather was the next to be troubled. He went into the garden one morning to find all his prize sweet-peas snipped off and lying on the ground.

Uncle Ken was the next to suffer. He was a heavy sleeper, and once he'd gone to bed he hated being woken up. So when he came to the breakfast table looking bleary-eyed and miserable, we asked if he was feeling all right.

"I couldn't sleep a wink last night," he complained. "Every time I was about to fall asleep, the bedclothes would be pulled off the bed. I had to get up at least a dozen times to pick them off the floor." He stared balefully at me. "Where were you sleeping last night, young man?"

I had an alibi. "In Grandfather's room," I said.

"That's right," said Grandfather. "And I'm a light sleeper. I'd have woken up if he'd been sleep-walking."

"It's that ghost from the peepal tree," said Grandmother. "It's moved into the house. First my spectacles, then the sweet-peas, and now Ken's bedclothes! What will it be up to next, I wonder?"

We did not have to wonder long. There followed a series of disasters. Vases fell off tables, pictures fell from walls. Parrot's feathers turned up in a teapot, while the parrot himself let out indignant squawks in the middle of the night. Uncle Ken found a crow's nest in his bed, and on tossing it out of the window was attacked by two crows.

- 5 When Aunt Minnie came to stay, things got worse. The pret seemed to take an immediate dislike to Aunt Minnie. She was a nervous, excitable person, just the right sort of prey for a spiteful ghost. Somehow her toothpaste got switched with a tube of Grandfather's shaving-cream, and when she appeared in the sitting-room, foaming at the mouth, we ran for our lives, Uncle Ken shouting that she'd got rabies.

Two days later Aunt Minnie complained that she had been hit on the nose by a grapefruit, which had of its own accord taken a leap from the pantry shelf and marched across the room straight at her. A bruised and swollen nose attested to the attack. Aunt Minnie swore that life had been more peaceful in upper Burma.

- 6 "We'll have to leave this house," declared Grandmother. "If we stay here much longer, both Ken and Minnie will have nervous breakdowns."

"I thought Aunt Minnie broke down long ago," I said.

"None of your cheek!" snapped Aunt Minnie.

"Anyway, I agree about changing the house," I said breezily. "I can't even do my homework. The ink-bottle is always empty."

"There was ink in the soup last night," complained Grandfather.

And so, a few days and several disasters later, we began moving to a new house.

Two bullock-carts laden with furniture and heavy luggage were sent ahead. The roof of the old car was piled high with bags and kitchen utensils. Everyone squeezed into the car, and Grandfather took the driver's seat.

- 7 We were barely out of the gate when we heard a peculiar sound, as if someone was chuckling and talking to himself on the roof of the car.

"Is the parrot out there on the luggage-rack?" asked Grandfather.

"No, he's in his cage on a bullock-cart," said Grandmother. Grandfather stopped the car, got out, and took a look at the roof.

"Nothing up there," he said, getting in again and starting the engine. "I'm sure I heard the parrot talking."

Grandfather had driven some way up the road when the chuckling started again, followed by a squeaky little voice. We all heard it. It was the *pret* talking to itself.

"Let's go, let's go!" it squeaked gleefully. "A new house, I can't wait to see it. What fun we're going to have!"

(from *Ghosts of a Hill-Station*)

### Activities

#### A Comprehension

1. (a) How does the author describe the ghost?  
(b) Why did Grandmother not like him?
2. (a) Where did the ghost live?  
(b) "For many years the *pret* did not bother anyone in the house!" Why?  
(c) "The *pret* could make himself felt, and sometimes heard." Give examples.

Narrate at least one amusing incident mentioned in this para

4. The *pret* behaved like a very naughty boy. Give two examples.
5. Why has the ghost been described as "spiteful"?
6. Why did they decide to leave the house? Why did the narrator (the child) agree to this proposal?
7. (a) Who was sitting on the roof of the car?

- (b) What did he do?
- (c) Why was he happy?

*B. For Discussion*

1. The following statements are argumentative in nature. Take a stand and speak either for or against them.
  - (a) There are no ghosts and no fairies.
  - (b) Stories about ghosts are interesting.
  - (c) Ghosts have no place in the modern scientific world.
2. A story is a piece of fiction. Find out examples from the story to prove this.

*C Suggested Reading*

*The Canterville Ghost*, Oscar Wilde.

## 5. A Tiger for Malgudi

*R.K. Narayan*

*[The narrator of this piece is a tiger. He has escaped from the circus and is wandering about in a town. Let's see how he describes the town and its people.]*

- 1 It was still a busy hour in the city when I entered Market Road. People ran for their lives at the sight of me. As I progressed through shutters were pulled down, and people hid themselves under eulverts, on trees behind pillars. The population was melting out of sight. At the circus I had had no chance to study human behaviour. Outside the circus ring they sat in their seats placidly while I cowered before Captain's whip. I got a totally wrong notion of human beings at that angle. I had thought that they were sturdy and fearless. But now I found them fleeing before me like a herd of deer, although I had no intention of attacking them. When I paused in front of a tailor's shop, he abandoned his machine and shut himself in a cupboard, wailing, "Alas, I am undone, won't someone shoot that tiger?" A prisoner between two constables, who had been caught for murder and was just emerging from the Court House, got his chance to escape when the constables fled, abandoning him with his handcuffs. I tore a horse from its *rutka* and enjoyed the sight of the passengers spilling out of it and running for their lives. A couple of street dogs invited destruction when they barked madly, instead of minding their business.
- 2 Later, I learnt from my Master of the chaos that befell the city when it became known that Captain had been destroyed and that I was somewhere in the city. Sheer hopelessness seems to have seized the townspeople. They withdrew to their homes and even there remained nervous. All doors and windows everywhere were shut, bolted, and sealed. Some even thought that I was some extraordinary creature who might pass through the walls and be in wait on the roof or in the loft or basement. Poor people living in huts had real cause

to worry I could have taken any of their homes apart. But why should I? One could understand their fears, but why should those living in brick and cement feel nervous? It was due to their general lack of a sense of security and an irrational dread of losing their assets. Why should an ordinary simple tiger have any interest in them either to destroy or to safeguard?

- 3 I rested for a moment at the door of Anand Bhavan, on Market Road, where coffee drinkers and tiffin eaters at their tables sat transfixed, uttering low moans on seeing me. I wanted to assure them, "Don't fear, I am not out to trouble you. Eat your tiffin in peace, don't mind me. You, nearest to me, hugging the cash box, you are craven with fear, afraid even to breathe. Go on, count the cash, if that's your pleasure. I just want to watch, that's all...If my tail trails down to the street, if I am blocking your threshold, it is because, I'm told, I'm eleven feet tip to tail. I can't help it. I'm not out to kill. I'm too full. I found a green pasture teeming with food on the way. Won't need any for several days to come, won't stir, not until I feel hungry again. Tigers attack only when they feel hunger, unlike human beings who slaughter one another without purpose or hunger..."

- 4 To the great delight of children, schools were being hurriedly closed. Children of all ages and sizes were running helter-skelter, screaming joyously, "No school, no school Tiger, tiger!" They were shouting and laughing and even enjoyed being scared. They seemed to welcome me. I felt like joining them, and bounded away from the restaurant door and trotted along with them, at which they gleefully cried, "The tiger is coming to eat us; let us get back to the school!"

I followed them through their school gate while they ran up and shut themselves in the school hall securely. I ascended the steps of the school, saw an open door at the far end of a veranda, and walked in. It happened to be the headmaster's room, I believed, as I noticed a very dignified man jumping on his table and heaving himself up into an attic. I walked in and flung myself on the cool floor, having a partiality for cool stone floors, with my head under the large desk—which gave me the feeling of being back in the Mempi cave...As I drowsed, I was aware of cautious steps and

hushed voices all around. I was in no mood to bother about anything. All I wanted was a little moment of sleep, the daylight was dazzling. In half sleep I heard the doors of the room being shut and bolted and locked. I didn't care I slept.

- 5 While I slept a great deal of consultation was going on. I learnt about it later through my Master, who was in the crowd—the crowd which had gathered after making sure that I had been properly locked up—and was watching. The headmaster seems to have remarked some days later, "Never dreamt in my wildest mood that I'd have to yield my place to a tiger." A wag had retorted, "Might be one way of maintaining better discipline among the boys."

"Now that this brute is safely locked up, we must decide —" began a teacher.

At this moment my Master pushed his way through the crowds and admonished, "Never use the words *beast* and *brute*. They're ugly words coined by man in his arrogance. The human being thinks all other creatures are 'beasts' Awful word!"

"Is this the occasion to discuss problems of vocabulary?" asked someone.

"Why not?" retorted my Master. At which they looked outraged.

Someone said, "What a reckless man you are! Who are you?"

"You are asking a profound question. I've no idea who I am! All my life I have been trying to find the answer. Are you sure you know who you are?"

### *Activities*

#### *A. Comprehension*

- 1 "I got a totally wrong notion of human beings at that angle."  
(a) Which angle is he talking about?  
(b) What did he think of human beings from that angle?  
(c) Why was this a wrong impression?



2. Why, according to the tiger, did the people "living in brick and cement feel nervous"?
3. When people saw the tiger they uttered low moans.
  - (a) What did the tiger want to do? What quality of the tiger does this bring out?
  - (b) What is the difference between tigers and men? Who emerges as the better of the two?
4. The tiger joined the children. This shows
  - (a) that he liked the company of happy people.
  - (b) that he wanted to go to school.
  - (c) that he liked children.
5. Where did he sleep? Why did he sleep there? What did the teacher call the tiger? Why was his Master offended?
6. What was the profound question someone asked the tiger's Master? Why was it a profound question?

### *B. Let's Find Out*

Let's find out

- (a) about Project Tiger
- (b) when the tiger becomes a man-eater.

### *C. Suggested Reading*

1. *My Grandfather's Zoo*, Ruskin Bond
2. *The Jungle Book*, Rudyard Kipling

## 6. We Can't Let Him Suffer

*James Herriot*

*[A poor, old man has only one companion—an old dog. The dog falls seriously ill. How can he be spared needless pain and suffering?]*

- 1 I looked again at the slip of paper where I had written my visits "Dean, 3, Thompson's Yard. Old dog ill."

House number three looked as though it wouldn't be able to hold out much longer.

The flakes of paint quivered on the rotten wood of the door as I knocked; above, the outer wall bulged dangerously on either side of a long crack in the masonry.

A small, white-haired man answered. His face, pinched and lined, was enlivened by a pair of cheerful eyes, he wore a much-darned woollen cardigan, patched trousers and slippers.

"I've come to see your dog," I said, and the old man smiled.

"Oh, I'm glad you've come, sir," he said, "I'm getting a bit worried about the old chap."

He led me into the tiny living-room. "I'm alone now, sir. Lost my missus over a year ago. She used to think the world of the old dog."

The grim evidence of poverty was everywhere. In the worn-out lino, the fireless hearth, the dank, musty smell of the place. The wallpaper hung away from the damp patches and on the table the old man's solitary dinner was laid: a fragment of bacon, a few fried potatoes and a cup of tea.

- 2 In the corner, on a blanket, lay my patient, a labrador. He must have been a big, powerful dog in his time, but the signs of age showed in the white hairs round his muzzle. He lay quietly and looked at me without hostility.

"Getting on a bit, isn't he, Mr Dean?"

"Aye, he is that. Nearly fourteen, but he's been like a pup galloping about until these last few weeks. Wonderful dog for his age, is old Bob and he's never offered to bite anybody in

## WE CAN'T LET HIM SUFFER

his life Children can do anything with him He's my only friend now—I hope you'll soon be able to put him right"

"Is he off his food, Mr Dean?"

"Yes, clean off, and that's a strange thing because, by gum, he could eat. He always sat by me and put his head on my knee at meal times, but he hasn't been doing it lately"

I looked at the dog with growing uneasiness The abdomen was grossly distended and I could read the telltale symptoms of pain: the catch in the respiration, the anxious, preoccupied expression in the eyes

- 3 When his master spoke, the tail thumped twice on the blankets and a momentary interest showed in the white old eyes, but it quickly disappeared and the blank, inward look returned.

I passed my hand carefully over the dog's abdomen "Come on, old chap," I said, "let's see if we can roll you over." The dog made no resistance as I eased him slowly on to his other side, but, just as the movement was completed, he whimpered and looked round The cause of the trouble was now only too easy to find.

Through the thin muscle of the flank I could feel a hard mass; certainly a cancer I stroked the old dog's head as I tried to collect my thoughts. This wasn't going to be easy

- 4 "Is he going to be ill for long?" the old man asked, and again came the thump, thump of the tail at the sound of the loved voice. "It's miserable when Bob isn't following me round the house when I'm doing my little jobs"

"I'm sorry, Mr Dean, but I'm afraid this is something very serious. You see this large swelling It is caused by an internal growth."

"You mean.. cancer?" the little man said faintly

"I'm afraid so, and it has progressed too far for anything to be done. I wish there was something I could do to help him, but there isn't"

The old man looked bewildered and his lips trembled "Then he's going to die?"

- 5 I swallowed hard. "We really can't just leave him to die, can we? He's in some distress now, but it will soon be an awful lot worse. Don't you think it would be kindest to put him to sleep? After all, he's had a good, long innings." I always aimed

at a brisk, matter-of-fact approach, but the old clichés had an empty ring

The old man was silent, then he said, "Just a minute," and slowly and painfully knelt down by the side of the dog. He did not speak, but ran his hand again and again over the grey old muzzle and the ears, while the tail thumped on the floor.

He knelt there a long time while I stood in the cheerless room, my eyes taking in the faded pictures on the walls, the frayed, grimy curtains, the broken sprung armchair.

At length the old man struggled to his feet and gulped once or twice. Without looking at me, he said huskily, "All right, will you do it now?"

I filled the syringe and said the things I always said. "You needn't worry, this is absolutely painless. Just an overdose of an anaesthetic. It is really an easy way out for the old fellow."

The dog did not move as the needle was inserted, and, as the barbiturate began to flow into the vein, the anxious expression left his face and the muscles began to relax. By the time the injection was finished, the breathing had stopped.

"Is that it?" the old man whispered.

"Yes, that's it," I said. "He is out of his pain now."

- 6 The old man stood motionless except for the clasping and unclasping of his hands. When he turned to face me his eyes were bright. "That's right, we couldn't let him suffer, and I'm grateful for what you've done. And now, what do I owe you for your services, sir?"

"Oh, that's all right, Mr Dean," I said quickly. "It's nothing—nothing at all. I was passing right by here—it was no trouble."

The old man was astonished. "But you can't do that for nothing."

"Now please say no more about it, Mr Dean. As I told you, I was passing right by your door." I said goodbye and went out of the house, through the passage and into the street. In the bustle of people and the bright sunshine, I could still see only the stark, little room, the old man and his dead dog.

As I walked towards my car, I heard a shout behind me. The old man was shuffling excitedly towards me in his slippers. His cheeks were streaked and wet, but he was smiling. In his hand he held a small, brown object.

"You've been very kind, sir I've got something for you." He held out the object and I looked at it. It was tattered but just recognizable as a precious relic of a bygone celebration.

"Go on, it's for you," said the old man. "Have a cigar."

### *Activities*

#### *A. Comprehension*

1. (a) Whose dog did the author go to see?  
(b) "The grim evidence of poverty was everywhere." What were the signs of poverty?
2. (a) Where was the dog lying? Describe him.  
(b) What was wrong with the dog?
3. (a) How did the dog react when he heard his master's voice?  
(b) What did the author find when he examined the dog?
4. Was there anything the doctor could do to cure the dog?
5. (a) What did the doctor suggest?  
(b) Did the old man agree to the doctor's suggestion? Why?
6. (a) Why were the old man's eyes bright?  
(b) Did the doctor charge fees for his services? Why not?
7. The cigar was a "precious relic" to the old man. Why did he offer it to the doctor then?

#### *B For Discussion*

Animals should be spared needless suffering. Discuss

*C. Suggested Reading*

1. *Dog Stories*, James Herriot
2. *My Family and Other Animals*, Gerald Durrell

## 7. The Muscular Son-in-law

*Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay*

*[It is good to be strong and healthy; but when a fat, flabby person becomes too muscular, his own relatives are likely to mistake him for an impostor. Let's find out what happened to the postmaster of Alipur.]*

### I

1 Nalini was the Postmaster of Alipur.

It was the month of Aswin<sup>1</sup> The Pujas were ahead. Nalini had asked for leave to go to Allahabad but had had no reply from the head office yet

One afternoon he sat restless in his office. If the order came even by 5 o'clock, he thought, he would leave for Allahabad by the evening mail. That was where his father-in-law lived. This would be Nalini's first visit to Allahabad since his marriage two years ago. His shopping had long been done, his trunks had already been packed; and he was ready to leave any minute. But the leave order hadn't come. At 4 o'clock the telephone rang. Nalini picked up the receiver anxiously.

"Hullo?"

It was only an inquiry about a money order over which there had been some trouble.

Disappointed, Nalini flopped back into his chair. He pulled out a letter from his pocket and began to read it. It was from his wife. He had read it several times before but wanted to read it once more.

2 My Beloved,

Your letter has been such a comfort to me. Is our long separation really at an end? I'm eagerly waiting for you to be with me. It is two years since we were married, but have

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<sup>1</sup> Aswin October

I had a chance to be with my husband even for a day? Come as soon as you get leave.

Mejdi arrived today from Dinapur. How long will it be before you do? Can you start on the day of the Panchami?

Remember me.

Yours only,  
Sarojini

Nalini turned it over and read it through again. Then he put it back into his pocket.

He looked at his watch—only a minute or two to 5 o'clock. The telephone began to ring

"Yes?"

Leave at last! Nalini had obtained two weeks' leave. He must leave for Allahabad at once. After all, he had a score to settle with 'Mejdi of Dinapur'

## II

- 3 When Nalini got married, he had a soft, round and flabby appearance. His cheeks were plump, his hands soft like butter. Kunjbala (Mejdi) could not help making a few sarcastic remarks followed by a verse of Tagore adapted suitably.

Like the lily does he look,  
'Lily' is his name,  
For soft he is, soft, so soft,  
Soft as is his name.  
No more soft than loosely knit,  
The home of sloth is his frame,  
Like the lily does he look,  
'Lily' is his name.

One word of ridicule stirs a man more than ten words of counsel. And when that word falls from the lips of a pretty woman and when that pretty woman is your sister-in-law, it becomes a hundred times more deadly. Nalini had never been able to put out of his mind the sarcastic words of his clever sister-in-law.

- 4 One day on his return from the post office, he was reclining in an easy chair, smoking when a sudden resolve took



shape in his mind, he would make his limbs firm and strong as befitted a young man. The very next day he bought a pair of Sandow's dumbbells and began taking regular exercises at home. He cut out from his daily fare sugar, milk, ghee and rice, and substituted for them bread and meat and eggs. A year's vigorous practice and diet-control made him look really strong and muscular. In order to enhance the manliness of his appearance he gave up shaving his beard.

Two years had gone by. Nalini was a different person altogether. Now was the time to meet Kunjbala, if only he could change his name.

### III

- 5 Next day, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, Nalini alighted at the Allahabad station. He wore loose trousers and a Punjabi long coat and had a turban on his head. He carried a thick stick in his hand.

Much to his surprise, none had come to meet him. Had the telegram he had sent off the previous day not reached, then? Having waited for a while in vain, he hired a coolie to carry his things and came out of the station. He asked a tongawalla, "Do you know the house of Mahendra Babu, the lawyer?"

"Yes, Babu. I do. I'll take you there."

- 6 In half an hour the tonga drew up in front of a house with a large compound. A girl of about nine or ten was playing in the verandah. Not far off was a well where a servant was noisily scrubbing a cooking-pan.

Alighting from the carriage Nalini asked the servant if he had come to the house of Mahendra Babu, the lawyer.

"Yes, Babu."

"Is he in?"

"No; he's gone to the house of Kedar Babu, the lawyer, for a game of dice."

"Well, go in and say that the Jamai Babu<sup>2</sup> has come."

The girl playing in the verandah ran into the house and announced in a voice that rent the skies "Your Jamai has

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<sup>2</sup> Jamai Babu, son-in-law

come." The servant, whose name was Ramsharan, said with an expansive smile, "Is it really the Jamai Babu?" He then washed his hands and did a low salaam to Nalini. Then he took down the luggage from the tonga and conducted Nalini to the sitting-room.

A girl came in and offered Nalini a glass, saying "Jamai Babu, have a little sherbet."

Nalini tasted it and found it to be salt-water. He put the glass down. A practical joke!

A door in one corner of the room opened and Ramsharan drew aside the curtain and said, "Babu, come in and have something to eat." Nalini obediently went in.

In the middle of the room a pretty carpet had been spread. There were silver dishes and bowls and glasses which contained food and drinks of many sorts. Nalini quietly sat down and turned his attention to the delicious things before him.

7 Presently, there came from the next room the tinkling of anklets. A little girl came to the door and said, "Mejdi is coming."

Nalini was sure it would be Kunjbala. He quickly pulled up the sleeve of his right arm. She should see that his wrist was no longer round and fat.

The tinkling came nearer.

"So you did think of us after so long!" Saying this a young woman came in. As soon as they looked at each other, she pulled down her sari over her face and rushed out of the room. Nalini knew it was not Kunjbala.

From the next room excited voices of two or three women came to Nalini's ears.

"What is it? Why did you come away?"

"Save me. It's a stranger."

"What! Not our Sarat?"

"Who is it, then?"

"I wish I knew."

"He must be an impostor."

"From his muscular appearance I shouldn't be surprised if he was."

"Ramsharan! Come here. Run along and tell Babu." And the sound of quick retreating steps.

- 8 In the meanwhile Nalini's eyes fell on a bookcase not far off. Rows of bound 'law reports' were there with the name 'M.N. Ghosh' in gold letters at the bottom of each. The whole affair became clear as daylight to Nalini. His father-in-law's name was Mohendranath Banerji. This gentleman was Mohendranath Ghosh. By mistake Nalini had come to another house. He smiled to himself and quietly finished his meal

## IV

- 9 It was a holiday. A number of Kedar Babu's friends, fond of playing dice, had gathered together at his house. Mohendra Babu Senior, Mohendra Babu Junior (Nalini's father-in-law) and several other pleaders were there

The game was in full swing when Ramsharan burst in upon them. Seeing his master he cried out, "Babu, Babu! come home at once." A frightened Mohendra Babu asked,

"What's the matter? Anyone seriously ill?"

"A robber—has—come—to the house."

"A robber? In broad daylight?"

"A robber—or an impostor—or a madman—I really don't know. He says 'I'm Babu's son-in-law' "

There was a general roar of laughter. Then Mohendra Ghosh asked, "When did he come? What's he doing now?"

"He came about 3 o'clock. He has brought a big stick and other things. He entered the inner apartments and took refreshments there. The ladies are very much frightened."

"The rascal! In whose care did you leave the house?"—and Mohendra Babu rushed out like a madman. Reaching home he shouted, "Where's the fellow."

Nalini came out of the room to the verandah. Saluting the owner of the house he said, "Mohendra Babu, please forgive me."

- 10 Somewhat nonplussed, Mohendra Babu said, "Who are you?"

"My name is Nalini Kanta Mukerji. I'm the son-in-law of Babu Mohendra Banerji. I asked the driver to take me to the house of Mohendra Babu, the lawyer. He brought me here. I realized my mistake only a little while ago. I should

have gone away. But a man had been sent to fetch you, so I waited to offer my apologies before I left "

Mohendra Babu's anger disappeared. He held Nalini's hand and broke into a long and loud laughter. Then he said, "There being two pleaders of the same name mistakes regarding clients are likely to occur. But this is the first time that there has been a mistake regarding sons-in-law."

Then he sent for a carriage and asked the driver to take Nalini to the house of Mohendra Banerji.

Mohendra Banerji, the lawyer, lived in the Shahgunj Square. As was his custom every evening, he sat in an easy chair alternately sipping his tea and smoking his hookah.

- 11 Presently, a tonga entered his compound and he heard an unfamiliar voice enquiring, "Is this Mohendra Babu's house?"

"Yes, Babu "

"Please tell him that his son-in-law has come."

Hearing the word 'son-in-law', Mohendra Babu jumped out of his chair and came out rushing. There stood a muscular man with a big stick in his hand, and the driver was taking down his luggage from the tonga.

Mohendra Babu knew it was the same impostor who had visited his colleague's house earlier. He shouted angrily, "Rascal! Impostor! Get out from here. After making your rounds you have now come to my house."

The servants had also assembled in the compound. Mohendra Babu said to them, "Take him by the neck and throw him out of the house. Thrash him "

The servants moved as if to fall upon Nalini. Nalini whirled his big stick over his head and said, "Take care. If you want me to go, I'll go. But if anyone touches me I'll pound his bones to powder." Unnerved, the servants stood still. Then Nalini said to Mohendra Babu, "You're making a mistake. I am your son-in-law." Mohendra Babu flared up again, "Don't I know my own son-in-law? He is no ruffian like you. Now get out of here, or I'll call the police."

Without a word Nalini got into the carriage and called out to the driver, "Drive to the station."

## V

12 When Mohendra Babu went to the inner apartments, his wife said, "Who have you driven away from the house?"

"An impostor "

"How do you know he was an impostor?"

Mohendra Babu recounted all that he had heard at Kedar Babu's house.

His wife said, "Yes, that may be true. But was he really an impostor? I'm sure it was our Jamai, who had gone to the wrong house first "

Mohendra Babu's heart sank The sight of the big stick, combined with what had happened at Kedar Babu's house, had made him furious He had had no time to consider these things calmly

After a pause he said, "If it had been him, he would have sent us a message beforehand. We should have gone to the station to meet him. No, it wasn't our son-in-law. It was an impostor "

"There was a likelihood of our son-in-law coming," Mrs Banerji said. "He was to arrive before the Pujas, though we were not informed of the exact date."

Kunjala chipped in "No, it couldn't be Nalini I saw him. Our Nalini is like a doll made of butter This was a sturdy ruffian."

Mohendra Babu felt reassured. He said, "You're quite right I do remember Nalini's appearance. True, I saw him only for a day when the marriage took place—but could I make a mistake in such a matter?"

In the midst of this conversation, a servant came and said, "Babu, here is a telegram "

When Mohendra Babu read the telegram, his face turned white. It was Nalini's telegram of the previous day.

Looking like a culprit and scratching his head, he said, "There's his telegram He was really our son-in-law." His wife said, "Now what can we do to bring him back?" "Well," answered the lawyer, "something must be done at once." Getting into the carriage he almost shouted to the driver, "To the Railway Station." Then he added, "There is no train

to Calcutta now. Probably he is waiting at the station. I must catch him there."

- 13 Nalini, when he came back, did not allude to what had happened. He saw that everyone was ashamed and sorry. That was enough. Two days later, when someone mentioned Mohendra Ghosh in another context, Nalini said, "The hospitable reception I got at the house of another man's father-in-law, many people do not find at their own."

### *Activities*

#### *A Comprehension*

1. What prevented Nalini from leaving for Allahabad at once?
2. (a) For how long had he been married?  
(b) How often had he visited his in-laws since his marriage?
3. Why did Nalini's sister-in-law make fun of him?
4. What did Nalini decide to do to prove her wrong?
5. Why, according to Nalini, had no one turned up to receive him?
6. What did he do then?
7. Why did Nalini pull up the sleeve of his right arm on hearing the approaching footsteps?
8. When did Nalini realize he had come to the wrong house?
9. How did Ramsharan, the servant, describe the visitor to Mohendra Babu?
10. The lawyer was very angry when he entered his house. What pacified him?

11. Why was Mohendra Banerji so agitated to hear that his son-in-law had arrived?
12. How did Mr Banerji realize that the visitor might not be an impostor? Give two reasons.
13. Did Nalini ever refer to the way he had been treated at first? If so, how?

*B. For Discussion*

1. A healthy man is a happy man.
2. It is possible to be humorous without making fun of others.

*C Suggested Reading*

1. *The Victory*, Rabindranath Tagore
2. *The Cabuliwallah*, Rabindranath Tagore
3. *The Lost Child*, Mulk Raj Anand

## 8. The Dilemma

### *A Play*

[What would you do if you found out that a member of your family whom you love is a criminal? Would you give him up to the authorities or would you try and protect him from the police? Read this play and see what Chris does in such a situation.]

### CHARACTERS

Chris }  
Giles } *two scouts on holiday*

Policeman

Warder, *from nearby prison*

Uncle James, *Chris's uncle*

Scene *An open heath not far from a famous prison*

Properties

Bicycle

Policeman's helmet

Prison warder's peaked cap

Satchel or bag

Small plaster cast

Scout uniforms for two boys

[Scene: *An open heath near a large prison. A PRISON WARDER is discovered standing in the centre of the stage looking out left. After a pause a POLICEMAN, pushing a bicycle, enters from the left.*]

POLICEMAN: Any luck?

WARDER: Not a sight or sound of anything. I don't think he can have come this way.

POLICE: Well, there's no knowing which way he's gone, but we've got to be alert just in case



WARDER: Don't I know it? This is the third prisoner to escape since Christmas, and every time it's been on my day off. You'd think they did it on purpose. Just a minute. *[peers left]* What's that down there? *[pointing]*

POLICE *[looking]*. Where?

WARDER: Under that bridge. Look!

POLICE: I can't see anything

WARDER: I thought I saw something move. *[rubs his eyes and yawns]* Your eyes play you tricks after a while at this game. No, there it is again; I thought I saw something.

POLICE: Yes, I see it. Oh, it's only a couple of kids coming up the bed of the stream

WARDER: You're right. Oh well, it might have been something.

POLICE *[still looking]*: I know them. They're camping with those scouts out the other side of the village. Nice kids

*[Enter two boys in scout uniform. One has a bag or satchel over his shoulder.]*

POLICE: Hold on a minute, you two—you might be able to help us.

GILES: Why, what's up?

POLICE: Where have you been this morning?

CHRIS: We've been following the stream for a couple of miles or so. We heard there was an otter somewhere in these parts, and we were looking for his tracks.

POLICE: Very interesting. You have to be pretty observant for a game like that, I reckon

GILES: In a way. Yes, I suppose so

WARDER: Here, look—I suppose you two wouldn't care to give us a hand for a little while.

GILES: How do you mean?

WARDER: You see a prisoner has escaped. I've got an idea he may be hiding in that bit of marsh over the hill there.

CHRIS: And you want us to search there for him.

POLICE *[emphatically]*: No, they can't do that.

GILES: It would be fun.

POLICE: No, you can't put civilians into danger like that.

CHRIS: But we're not civilians—we're scouts.

POLICE: All the same, you can't do it

WARDER Suppose they stayed up here to keep a lookout while we went down and searched the marsh?

POLICE: Yes. I suppose that would be all right.

CHRIS. Well, what's he like to look at?

WARDER: I've only seen him once myself. He didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary. The official description says he has blue eyes. He left the prison in a brown suit, but of course that may not mean much. Oh, there's one thing I happened to notice myself, he has a funny trick of putting his hands in each of his pockets in turn while he's talking.

POLICE: Not much help, unless he happens to be talking to himself as he creeps along. No, you'd best just look out for anything suspicious and let us know about it when we get back. We shan't be very long.

GILES. All right then. And if we're not here when you get back, just look around for a trail.

CHRIS: Or a couple of bound and gagged figures in the ditch.

POLICE: Now don't you joke about it.

[*The boys laugh as the two men go off right.*]

CHRIS: This'll be something to tell others, won't it?

GILES: We probably shan't see anything.

CHRIS: We might. Anyway, we'd better watch.

GILES: Let's divide the ground up, then. This place makes quite a handy lookout, doesn't it?

CHRIS: There'll be no need to watch the marsh.

GILES: That's easy then. You take everything on the left of the village [*indicating the section of countryside on the left with both hands*] and I'll take everything to the right of it. [*He waves to show the area behind him.*] All right?

CHRIS: Right! [*They take up their positions, CHRIS facing out left, GILES looking upstage.*] There's someone moving in your part already.

GILES: Where? I don't see anything. And besides, that's cheating. You should be watching your own side.

CHRIS: Sorry, but there is someone. Look! Over there. A man, I think.

GILES: I still can't see.

CHRIS: He's gone behind that bush with the yellow flowers.

GILES: I can't . Oh yes, I can. He's come out now. *[pause]* I say, he's acting in a very peculiar way See how he keeps turning round and looking back at the village?

CHRIS I bet it's the convict. He's certainly acting in a very suspicious manner

GILES I don't know. Perhaps he's just calling a dog or something

CHRIS See how he's walking along the ditch to keep out of sight

GILES It is a bit queer What shall we do? He's coming this way

CHRIS. Hide, do you mean?

GILES There isn't anywhere to hide up here Too late, anyway, he's seen us

CHRIS. And he's still coming You'd have thought he'd have cleared off directly he saw someone looking at him, wouldn't you?

GILES: Well, what shall we do? Quick! Do you think he's dangerous?

CHRIS: We can always run at the last minute. I don't suppose he'd go for two of us.

GILES: Ssh. here he is.

*[Enter UNCLE JAMES. His manner alternates between normal easy behaviour and a highly suspicious, backward glancing nervousness He is dressed in brown tweeds.]*

UNCLE: Hullo! Do either of you boys know ..Why, bless my soul if it isn't Chris!

CHRIS. Uncle James! Well, that's a joke Fancy meeting you here. We thought you were a fugitive from justice

UNCLE *[starting]*: Thought what?

GILES: We're keeping a lookout for the escaped convict.

UNCLE *[laughing]*: Oh, I see, one of the convicts has escaped, has he? I say, but you've grown, Chris. When was it I saw you last?

CHRIS: Christmas. That's not so very long really.

UNCLE: No, all the same you look positively immense. And what are you doing down here?

CHRIS. I'm camping with scouts We're just out the other side of the village. This is...Oh, I'm sorry...This is Giles, a friend of mine.

GILES. How do you do?

UNCLE: How do you do? [*shakes hands*] Camping, eh? And very nice, too

CHRIS: I certainly didn't expect to see you here. Are you on holiday, too?

UNCLE [*vaguely*]: Holiday? Oh yes, that's right. On holiday.

CHRIS: Have you been here long?

UNCLE: No. .er. .only a couple of days.

CHRIS: How long are you staying here?

UNCLE: Well, that rather depends...[*looks nervously behind and then recovers quickly*]. on your Aunt Alice, I mean

CHRIS: Yes, where is she? At the hotel? I must call in and see her.

UNCLE: She can't see you just now.

CHRIS: Not see me? Is she ill or something?

UNCLE: That's right. She's ill [*confused*] No, she's not ill. It's just one of her headaches. She's lying down. Come and see us tomorrow, that would be best.

CHRIS: All right then

GILES: Look, if you don't mind, I think I'll go and have a look at that hilly bit over there. I think there's probably a better view.

CHRIS: Why do you want a good view? Oh, of course, the convict. All right, Giles.

GILES [*to UNCLE JAMES*]: Goodbye, then.

UNCLE: Goodbye, Giles. Come along tomorrow with Chris, won't you? Tell you what; come to tea, and I'll fix up a good one for you both.

GILES: Thank you very much, I'd love to come. [*goes*]

UNCLE: Well, I don't want to interfere with your game...

CHRIS: It isn't exactly a game, Uncle.

UNCLE: Sorry, no, you told me, didn't you? You're keeping a lookout for this convict

CHRIS: You could stay and give us a hand if you liked.

UNCLE: That's very nice of you, but as a matter of fact I shall have to be getting on soon. I've got an appointment

CHRIS: An appointment? Around here?

UNCLE: [*He is embarrassed, and in his embarrassment he puts his hands in each of his pockets in turn.*] Well, yes. A sort of appointment I can't quite explain. You see, it's rather private, if you see what I mean

CHRIS [*laughing*]: I'd forgotten you did that.

UNCLE: Did what?

CHRIS: Kept putting your hands in different pockets... [*Realization dawns, and he is horrified.*] Uncle James!

UNCLE: Whatever is the matter with you?

CHRIS: Uncle, you're the.. the ..

UNCLE: You've gone quite pale. What's the matter? Do you feel all right?

CHRIS [*gulping*]. Why were you sneaking along the ditch down there? Why do you keep looking behind you? Where are you really going?

UNCLE [*bluffing*]: Sneaking? Whatever do you mean?

CHRIS: We saw you from here, crawling along the ditch.

UNCLE: Well, I was just .. [*He is at a loss; his self-confidence deserts him.*] Look, Chris, I can trust you, can't I?

CHRIS: Trust me?

UNCLE: Yes. You won't say anything about seeing me, will you?

CHRIS: You were sneaking then, weren't you?

UNCLE: I just had to get out, Chris. It seemed such a splendid chance, I couldn't let it go...

CHRIS: How did you manage? It couldn't have been easy.

UNCLE: It was a bit tricky. But I managed I don't know about the others yet, though The arrangement was that we met somewhere here.

CHRIS: Others? How many of you are there then?

UNCLE: Three others besides myself. We all got the same idea, you see. And then we fixed up to have the guns brought here—that was the most difficult part...

CHRIS: Guns?

UNCLE: Yes, of course. It wouldn't be much use without guns, would it?

CHRIS: No, I suppose not.

[*GILES returns.*]

GILES: I say, Chris, there are three more men coming up that ditch. Three of them!

CHRIS [*miserably*]: Yes, there would be three.

UNCLE: Oh, God. That means they've got away all right. I'll

go and meet them. Now, remember Chris. Not a word about this. [*goes off left*]

GILES: What's the matter with you, Chris? You look as if you've seen a ghost

CHRIS: I have.

GILES: Don't be daft.

CHRIS: I have, though in a manner of speaking. Don't you realize? That was my Uncle James.

GILES: I rather gathered that.

CHRIS: Well... [*gulping*]... he's the the escaped convict

GILES: He's what?

CHRIS: The convict. The man we've been looking for

GILES: Oh, don't talk rubbish. How could he be?

CHRIS: Didn't you notice? Blue eyes, brown suit and that silly habit of feeling in his pockets...

GILES: But there might be a million people who do that.

CHRIS [*utterly miserable*]: But he confessed. Didn't you hear him say that I wasn't to tell anyone?

GILES: You've broken that promise, anyway; you've just told me

CHRIS: Oh crumbs, so I have. I don't know what to do

GILES: How do you mean? You don't have to do anything

CHRIS: But I do. What about when those two come back? If I don't tell them, I shall be as much a criminal as Uncle James, and if I do tell them.. how can I give my own uncle away?

GILES: You ought not to have let him tell you, that's where you went wrong

CHRIS: A fat lot of help that is. I know now, don't I?

GILES: Yes. [*considers*] Well, I suppose as we've got our scout uniforms on you have to do your public duty before anything else. It's almost like being put on your honour, isn't it?

CHRIS: You mean I have to tell them?

GILES: That's how it seems to me

CHRIS: I suppose you're right. And he gave me a smashing train set for Christmas

GILES: He probably stole it.

CHRIS: I don't care. He's the best uncle I've got. It'll be such a waste giving him up to the police

GILES: Well, you've got to make up your mind one way or another, or it's not my business.

CHRIS I wish it wasn't mine I wish I'd never come camping.

I wish I knew what to do

GILES Well, I say you ought to report him to the police when they come You can take it or leave it.

CHRIS: I suppose you're right Oh dear, isn't life difficult?

GILES Here they are, coming up the hill now.

[Enter WARDER AND POLICEMAN from right.]

POLICE. You're still here, then? We thought you'd be off on the trail by now.

CHRIS [*flatly*]: No, we're still here.

WARDER: Did you see anything? No, I suppose not.

[GILES nudges CHRIS, who looks at the ground, and then after an awkward silence, forces himself to speak.]

CHRIS: You ..er ..didn't have any luck over on the marsh, then?

POLICE: No, a complete blank Just a waste of time. I think he's got away by now.

[Sound of men's voices off.]

UNCLE [*off*]: They said they'd be here, I don't know what's keeping them

[UNCLE JAMES and three other men enter.]

UNCLE. Hullo again, you boys. Still here?

[GILES kicks CHRIS on the ankle and he yelps.]

GILES [*in a loud whisper*]. Go on. Tell them now.

POLICE: Tell who? Tell who what?

CHRIS: Well, you see I...Uncle I'm sorry. I've got to do it. It's my duty.

UNCLE: Got to do what?

CHRIS: Tell. [*to POLICEMAN*] My uncle [*pointing dramatically*] is the...the ..man you've been looking for

[CHRIS turns his back on the group. There is a pause and the POLICEMAN and the WARDER look puzzled.]

POLICE: What man I've been looking for?

[There is a series of short blasts on a whistle off stage. Another whistle of different pitch joins in.]

WARDER. That's it. That's the sound I've been wanting to hear.

GILES. What does it mean?

POLICE: It means they've caught the escaped convict, that's what. Now we can all go home.

[The POLICEMAN and the WARDER move over to the extreme left of the stage and pause there, talking.]

CHRIS: But how can they have caught him? You're the escaped convict, Uncle James.

UNCLE: Me! Good Heavens, Chris, what a fantastic chap you are!

CHRIS: But the guns? And sneaking away...?

UNCLE [laughing]: The guns are for shooting rabbits, and I had to sneak away quietly because your aunt wanted to take me off to tea with a boring old school friend she hasn't seen for fifteen years.

POLICE [ready to go]: Well, goodbye, all. And many thanks for the help. Oh! You were just going to tell me something, weren't you? About your uncle, wasn't it?

CHRIS: I... he... [lamely] We're going to tea with him tomorrow.

POLICE [very puzzled]: Oh! And very nice, too. Well, good day all. [withdraws]

[Slow curtain]



*Activities**A. Comprehension*

1. (a) Who were the policeman and the warder looking for?  
(b) What did they ask Chris and Giles to do?  
(c) Why did they ask the boys to do this?
2. How did they describe the escaped convict?
3. (a) Who did the boys meet on the heath?  
(b) Why did Chris think his uncle was an escaped convict? Give any two reasons.
4. (a) What was Chris's dilemma?  
(b) What suggestion was given by Giles for sorting out the dilemma?
5. "That's the sound I've been wanting to hear "  
(a) What was the sound the warder heard?  
(b) What did it mean?
6. Why was Chris's Uncle "sneaking along the moor"? Why had he got guns?

*B. For Discussion*

1. Love for the country should come before love for the family
2. Scouting and Girl Guiding are essential co-curricular activities.

## 9. The Blanket

*[When our clothes or books become old and useless we give them away or discard them Can we do the same with human beings?]*

Petey hadn't really believed that Dad would be doing it—sending Granddad away. "Away" was what they were calling it. Not until now could he believe it of Dad.

But here was the blanket that Dad had that day bought for him, and in the morning he'd be going away. And this was the last evening they'd be having together. Dad was off seeing that girl he was to marry. He'd not be back till late, and they could sit up and talk.

It was a fine September night, with a thin white moon riding high over the gully. When they'd washed up the supper dishes, they went out on the shanty porch, the old man and the bit of a boy, taking their chairs. "I'll get me fiddle," said the old man, "and play some of the old tunes "

But instead of the fiddle he brought out the blanket. It was a big, double blanket, red, with black cross stripes. "Now, isn't that a fine blanket!" said the old man, smoothing it over his knees "And isn't your father a kind man to be giving the old fellow a blanket like that to go away with? It cost something, it did—look at the wool of it. And warm it will be these cold winter nights to come There'll be few blankets there the equal of this one!"

It was like Granddad to be saying that. He was trying to make it easier. He'd pretended all along it was he that was wanting to go away to the great brick building—the government place, where he'd be with so many other old fellows having the best of everything

But Petey hadn't believed Dad would really do it, until this night when he brought home the blanket.

"Oh, yes, it's a fine blanket," said Petey, and got up and went into the shanty. He wasn't the kind to cry, and, besides, he was too old for that, being eleven. He'd just come in to fetch Granddad's fiddle.

The blanket slid to the floor as the old man took the fiddle and stood up. It was the last night they'd be having together. There wasn't any need to say, "Play all the old tunes." Granddad tuned up for a minute, and then said, "This is one you'll like to remember."

The thin moon was high overhead, and there was a gentle breeze playing down the gully. He'd never be hearing Granddad play like this again. It was as well Dad was moving into that new house, away from here. He'd not want, Petey wouldn't, to sit here on the old porch of fine evenings, with Granddad gone.

The tune changed. "Here's something gayer." Petey sat and stared out over the gully. Dad would marry that girl. Yes, that girl who'd kissed him and slobbered over him, saying she'd try to be a good mother to him, and all. His chair creaked as he involuntarily gave his body a painful twist.

The tune stopped suddenly, and Granddad said, "It's a poor tune, except to be dancing to." And then, "It's a fine girl your father's going to marry. He'll be feeling young again, with a pretty wife like that. And what would an old fellow like me be doing around their house, getting in the way, and an old nuisance, what with my talk of aches and pains. And then there'll be babies coming, and I'd not want to be there to hear them crying at all hours. It's best that I take myself off, like I'm doing. One more tune or two, and then we'll be going to bed to get some sleep against the morning, when I'll pack up my fine blanket and take my leave. Listen to this, will you? It's a bit sad, but a fine tune for a night like this."

They didn't hear the two people coming down the gully path, Dad and the pretty girl with the hard, bright face like a china doll's. But they heard her laugh, right by the porch, and the tune stopped on a wrong, high, startled note. Dad didn't say anything, but the girl came forward and spoke to Granddad prettily, "I'll not be seeing you leave in the morning, so I came over to say goodbye."

"It's kind of you," said Granddad, with his eyes cast down; and then, seeing the blanket at his feet, he stooped to pick it up. "And will you look at this," he said in embarrassment, "the fine blanket my son has given me to go away with!"

"Yes," she said, "it's a fine blanket." She felt the wool, and repeated in surprise, "A fine blanket—I'll say it is!" She turned to Dad and said to him coldly, "It cost something, didn't it?"

He cleared his throat, and said defensively, "I wanted him to have the best .."

The boy went abruptly into the shanty. He was looking for something. He could hear the girl reproaching Dad, and Dad becoming angry in his slow way. And now she was suddenly going away in a huff. As Petey came out, she turned and called back, "All the same, he doesn't need a double blanket!" And she ran up the gully path.

"Oh, she's right," said the boy coldly. "Here, Dad" —and he held out a pair of scissors. "Cut the blanket in two."

Both of them stared at the boy, startled. "Cut it in two, I tell you, Dad!" he cried out. "And keep the other half!"

"That's not a bad idea," said Granddad gently. "I don't need so much of a blanket."

"Yes," said the boy harshly, "a single blanket's enough for an old man when he's sent away. We'll save the other half, Dad, it will come in handy later."

"Now what do you mean by that?" asked Dad.

"I mean," said the boy slowly, "that I'll give it to you, Dad—when you're old and I'm sending you away."

There was a silence, and then Dad went over to Granddad and stood before him, not speaking. But Granddad understood. Petey was watching them. And he heard Granddad whisper, for he put out a hand and laid it on Dad's shoulder. "It's all right, son—I know you didn't mean it." And then Petey cried.

But it didn't matter—because they were all three crying together.

### *Activities*

#### *A Comprehension*

1. What gift did Petey's father give Granddad?
2. Where was Granddad going? Why was he going away?

- 3 How do we know that Petey would miss his Granddad?
4. Petey was upset Granddad tried to give him the impression that he liked going away How did he do that?
5. (a) What did Petey bring out of the house? What did he ask his father to do with it?  
(b) What reason did he give for this?
- 6 Dad went up to Granddad but didn't say anything but Granddad understood his feelings What do you think these were?

*B. For Discussion*

1. Old people are better off in an Old Folks' Home
2. Children must be compelled to look after their parents in their old age.

## 10. Later

*[How often we say to ourselves, "If only I had done this. ." Sometimes these regrets are justified, sometimes they are not because many events take place that are beyond our control. Read this story and judge for yourself]*

- 1 It's queer, the things you remember. When life has crumbled suddenly, and left you standing there, alone. It's not the big important things that you remember when you come to that: not the plans of years, not the love nor the hopes you've worked so hard for. It's the little things that you remember then: the little things you hadn't noticed at the time. The way a hand touched yours, and you too busy to notice; the hopeful little inflection<sup>1</sup> of a voice you didn't really bother to listen to.

John Carmody found that out, staring through the living-room window at the cheerful Tuesday-afternoon life of the street. He kept trying to think about the big, important things, lost now—the years and the plans, and the hopes and the love. But he couldn't quite get them focused sharply in his mind, just now. Not this afternoon.

They, those important things, were like a huge but nebulous<sup>2</sup> background in his mind. All he could remember, now, was a queer little thing, nothing, really, if you stopped and thought about it in the light of the years and the plans and the—the great love. It was only something his little girl had said to him. One evening, two—perhaps three—weeks ago. Nothing, if you looked at it rationally<sup>3</sup>. The sort of thing that kids are always saying.

But it was what he was remembering, now.

- 2 That particular night, he had brought home from the office a finished draft of the annual stockholders' report. Very important, it was. Things being as they were, it meant a great deal—to his future, to the future of his wife and his little girl.

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inflection: change in tone and pitch

nebulous cloudlike

rationally, in a common-sense way

He sat down to re-read it before dinner. It had to be right, it meant so much.

And just as he turned a page, Marge, his little girl, came with a book under her arm. It was a green-covered book, with a fairy tale picture pasted on it. And she said "Look, Daddy."

He glanced up and said, "Oh fine. A new book, eh?" "Yes, Daddy," she said "Will you read me a story in it?"

"No, dear Not just now," he said.

Marge just stood there, and he read through a paragraph which told the stockholders about certain replacements in the machinery of the factory. And Marge's voice, with timid and hopeful little inflections, was saying, "But Mummy said you probably would, Daddy."

He looked up over the top of the typescript "I'm sorry," he answered. "Maybe Mummy will read it to you. I'm busy, dear."

"No," Marge said politely "Mummy is much busier, upstairs. Won't you read me just this one story? Look—it has a picture. See? Isn't it a lovely picture, Daddy?"

"Oh, yes. Beautiful," he said "Now, that picture has class, hasn't it? But I do have to work tonight. Some other time..."

After that, there was quite a long silence. Marge just stood there, with the book open at the lovely picture. It was a long time before she said anything else. He read through two more pages explaining in full detail, as he had directed, the shift in markets over the past twelve months, the plans outlined by the sales department for meeting these problems which, after all, could safely be ascribed to local conditions; and the advertising programme which after weeks of conferences had been devised to stabilize and even increase the demand for their products

"But it is a lovely picture, Daddy. And the story looks so exciting," Marge said. "I know," he said "Ah...some other time. Run along, now."

"I'm sure you'd enjoy it, Daddy," Marge said.

"Eh?"

Marge said, "Well, some other time, then. Will you, Daddy? Some other time?"

--"Oh, of course," he said "You bet."

But she didn't go away. She still stood there quietly, like a good child. And after a long time, she put the book down on the stool at his feet, and said,

- 3 "Well, whenever you get ready, just read it to yourself. Only read it loud enough so I can hear, too."

"Sure," he said. "Sure. Later."

And that was what John Carmody was remembering now. Not the long plans of love and care for the years ahead. He was remembering the way a well-mannered child had touched his hand with timid little fingers, and said, "Just read it to yourself. Only read it loud enough so I can hear, too."

And that was why, now, he put his hand on the book. From the corner table where they had piled some of Marge's playthings, picking them up from the floor where she had left them.

The book wasn't new any more, and the brown cover was dented and thumbed. He opened it to the lovely picture

- 4 And reading that story, his lips moving stiffly with anguish to form the words, he didn't try to think any more, as he should be thinking, about the important things: about his careful and shrewd and loving plans for the years to come, and for a little while he forgot even the horror and bitterness of his hate for the half-drunken punk kid who had careened down the street in a second-hand car—and who was now in jail on manslaughter charges.

He didn't even see his wife, white and silent, dressed for Marge's funeral, standing in the doorway, trying to make her voice say calmly "I'm ready, dear. We must go."

Because John Carmody was reading.

"Once upon a time, there was a little girl who lived in a woodcutter's hut in the Black Forest. And she was so fair that the birds forgot their singing from the bough, looking at her. And there came a day when . . ."

He was reading it to himself. But loud enough for her to hear, too. Maybe.



### *Activities*

#### *A. Comprehension*

1. After a tragedy we don't seem to remember the big, important things. What do we remember then?
2. John Carmody was too busy to read aloud a story to his daughter. What was he busy with and why was it important?
3. Marge's father was too busy to read aloud a story to her. What was her last request to him?
4. What had happened to Marge?
5. (a) What was Carmody's wife dressed for? Why did he not see her?  
(b) He was reading the story aloud
  - (i) because that was his daughter's last wish.
  - (ii) because he thought Marge might be able to hear the story
  - (iii) to comfort himself.

#### *B. Let's Find Out*

What's a breathalyser test? Why is it important?

#### *C. For Discussion*

The big, important happenings in life don't matter at all. It is the small, insignificant happenings that really matter to all of us. Give examples from your life.

# 11. The Gift of the Magi<sup>1</sup>

*O. Henry*

*[Suppose you want to give a gift to someone you love dearly—and you have no money. What would you do?]*

- 1 One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bargaining with the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

She could not buy a Christmas gift for her husband with only one dollar and eighty-seven cents. There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and cry. So Della did it. Which reminds one that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

- 2 Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow could be Christmas Day, and she had only one dollar and eighty-seven cents with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only one dollar and eighty-seven cents to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare, something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a tall glass between the windows of the room. Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

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<sup>1</sup> the three wise men from the East who gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus as a sign of their love, respect and honour

- 3 Now there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read, "Mme Sofronie, Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran—and collected herself, panting.

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"Take your hat off," said Madame, "and let's have a look at your hair."

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Soon with twenty dollars in her pocket, she was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

- 4 She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores. It was a platinum fob chain<sup>2</sup> simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the eighty-seven cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

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<sup>2</sup> fob chain—a short chain meant to be attached to a pocket watch

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what would I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At seven o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered, "Please, God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

- 5 Jim stopped inside the door. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went to him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas,' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, gift 've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labour.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, Jim. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance, Jim seemed quickly to wake up. He enfolded his Della. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The Magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why I was shocked."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy, and then, alas! a quick change to hysterical tears and wails. For there lay The Combs—the set of combs that Dell had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say, "My hair grows so fast, Jim."

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh—"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it beautiful Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep them awhile. They're too nice to use, just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

- 6 The Magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi.

### *Activities*

#### *A. Comprehension*

1. Why did Della cry?
2. Della "stood by the window and looked out dully at a *gray* cat walking a *gray* fence in a *gray* backyard."
  - (a) Does the word 'gray' match Della's mood?
  - (b) Was she
    - (i) heartbroken?

(ii) grief-stricken?

(iii) depressed?

(iv) upset?

Give a reason for your answer.

3. What were the two precious possessions of Della and Jim?
4. What did Della buy for Jim? Why did she buy this particular gift?
5. Why was Jim shocked when he saw Della without her hair?
6. (a) Why does the narrator describe Jim and Della as two foolish children?  
(b) Then later why does he describe them as "the wisest"?

### *B. For Discussion*

A gift is a token of love so it need not be expensive

*General:* Make a list of a couple of gifts which you would like to give your parents and which would make them happy

### *C. Suggested Reading*

*The Diamond Necklace*, Guy de Maupassant